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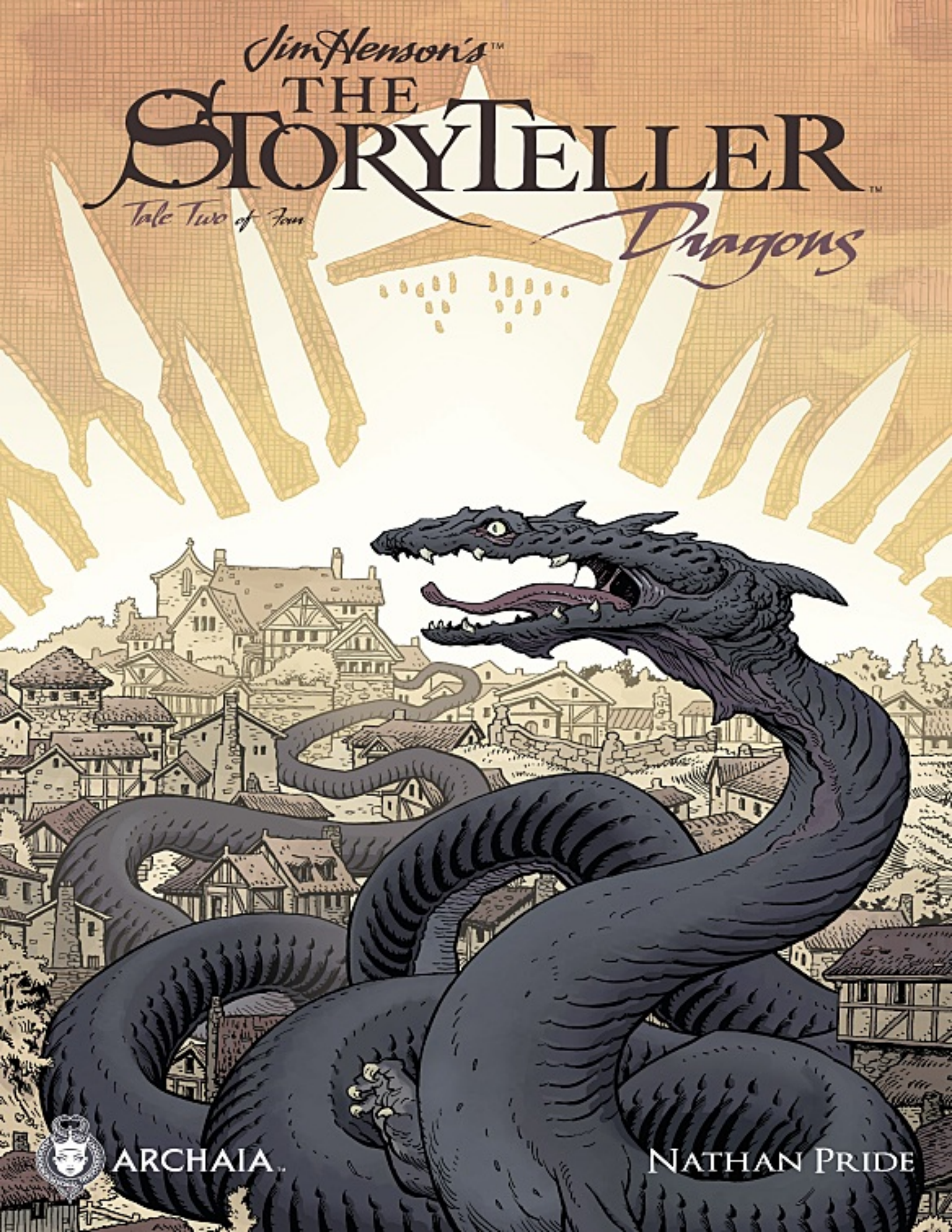
Tale Two of Four

Dragons



ARCHAIA

NATHAN PRIDE

the Worm of Lambton

Story & Art by
Nathan Pride

Colors by
Cassie Kelly

Letters by
Warren Montgomery

Cover by Nathan Pride

Spot Illustrations by David Petersen

Designer
Jillian Crab

Assistant Editor
Cameron Chittock

Editor
Sierra Hahn

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THE STORYTELLER™
Dragons

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MANY CENTURIES AGO THERE LIVED IN THE COUNTY OF DURHAM, ON THE RIVER WEAR, A YOUNG MAN NAMED JOHN.
JOHN WAS HEIR TO THE LORDSHIP OF LAMBTON AND, ACCORDING TO ANCIENT LEGEND, THE LAMBTON FAMILY "WAS SO BRAVE THEY FEARED NEITHER MAN NOR GOD."
Young John was brash, unbridled, and righteous. He held little regard for the devoted and hard-working subjects of his father, Lord Edward.
Expressing disrespect and mockery were all part of his daily dawdles.
THIS LOOKS TO BE A FINE DAY FOR FISHING IF THERE EVER WAS ONE CREATED.
Many times he cast his line--coming up with nothing but river plants and a hungry hook.
This enraged the proud hunter to no end as he shook, shook, shook his fist in the air.
I SHOULD HAVE DISTRUSTED THIS *FINE* MORNING. I CURSE THIS RIVER FOR PLAYING ME A *FOOL!* I WILL NOT BE DEFEATED IN THIS SIMPLE TASK OF CATCHING A FISH!
The next words--too ghastly to repeat--from the young heir's mouth would have made the Devil himself cringe in disgust. Villagers and servants, walking by on their way to the chapel, did not differ in their reaction to his disgraceful outburst.

Filled with frustration, John cast the rod toward the river in one grand gesture of will and might. The river appeared to move faster, almost churning at the entrance of the hook and line.

TUG
A tug! Yes, a tug that nearly wrenched him from the banks of the river.

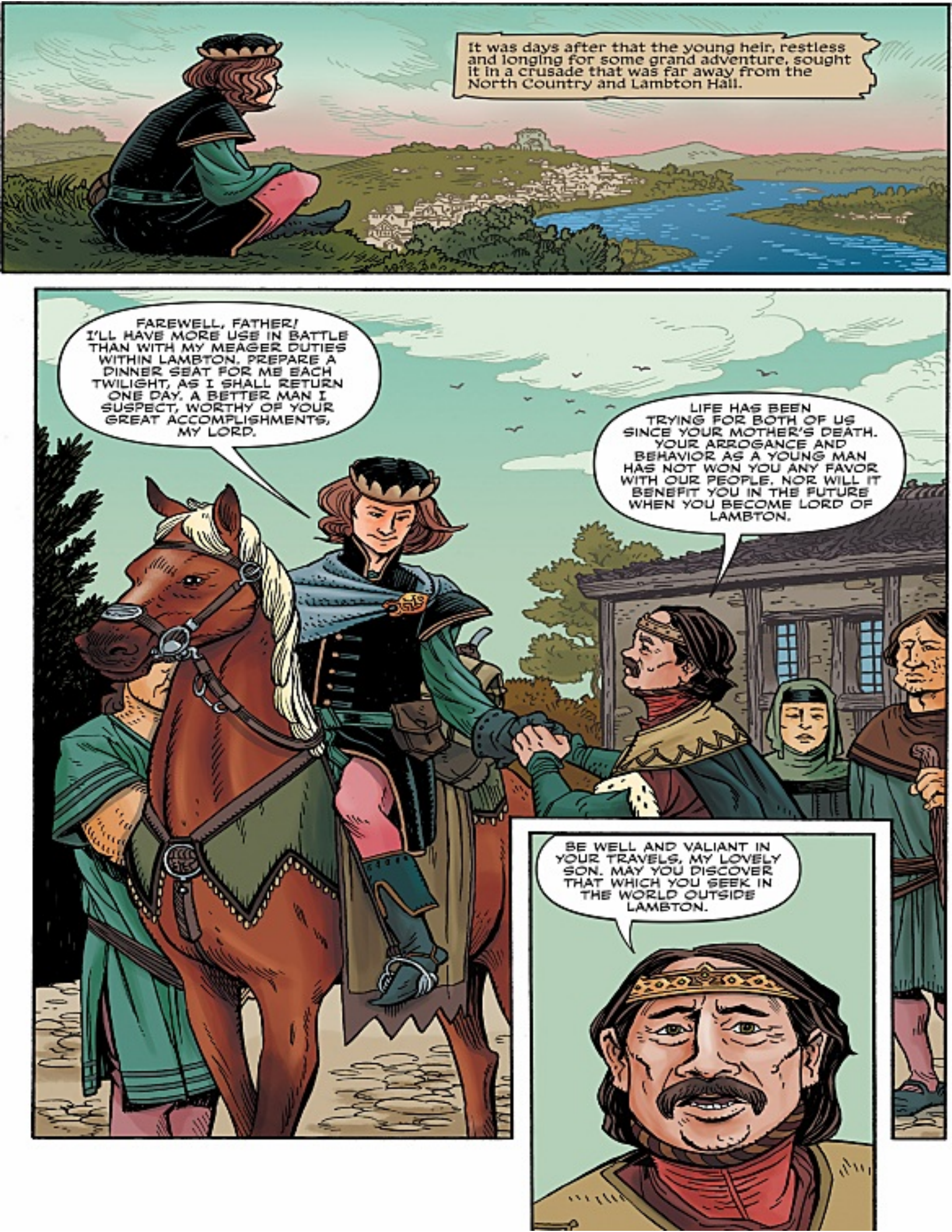
John coaxed his strong prey to the surface. Only, he did not find a fish on his line, but instead a wriggling worm of unsightly appearance.

UGGH! LEAVE MY SIGHT YOU SLIMY RIVER DROPPING.
Young John gave it not a second thought, tore it from the barbed hook and cast the creature into a well just nearby.

HO! WHAT HAVE YOU CAUGHT THIS DAY, YOUNG MASTER!

I MAY HAVE LIFTED UP THE FILTHY DEVIL HIMSELF! LOOK WITHIN THE WELL AND JUDGE FOR YOURSELF.

AYE! *WHUFF* THAT *IS* GHASTLY! THIS, ON THE SABBATH, DOES NOT BODE WELL, MASTER.


It was days after that the young heir, restless and longing for some grand adventure, sought it in a crusade that was far away from the North Country and Lambton Hall.
FAREWELL, FATHER! I'LL HAVE MORE USE IN BATTLE THAN WITH MY MEAGER DUTIES WITHIN LAMBTON. PREPARE A DINNER SEAT FOR ME EACH TWILIGHT, AS I SHALL RETURN ONE DAY. A BETTER MAN I SUSPECT, WORTHY OF YOUR GREAT ACCOMPLISHMENTS, MY LORD.
LIFE HAS BEEN TRYING FOR BOTH OF US SINCE YOUR MOTHER'S DEATH. YOUR ARROGANCE AND BEHAVIOR AS A YOUNG MAN HAS NOT WON YOU ANY FAVOR WITH OUR PEOPLE, NOR WILL IT BENEFIT YOU IN THE FUTURE WHEN YOU BECOME LORD OF LAMBTON.
BE WELL AND VALIANT IN YOUR TRAVELS, MY LOVELY SON. MAY YOU DISCOVER THAT WHICH YOU SEEK IN THE WORLD OUTSIDE LAMBTON.

In two cycles of the moon the Worm had grown enough in length and girth to find egress from its stone confinement.
WHAA--!
It moved swiftly to a group of broad rocks, where it lay sunning itself, immobile amid the fast moving River Wear.
By night it had found a nearby hill studded with jeweled heather and soft grasses to slumber upon.
Over time, the Worm continued to grow, and grow, and grow.

The Worm would not want for food in the lands around the North Country.
There were Geoffrey Turner's pigs--plump and full of vigor.

David Gilbert's lambs gave the Worm quite the sporting chase up and down the dewy pastures.

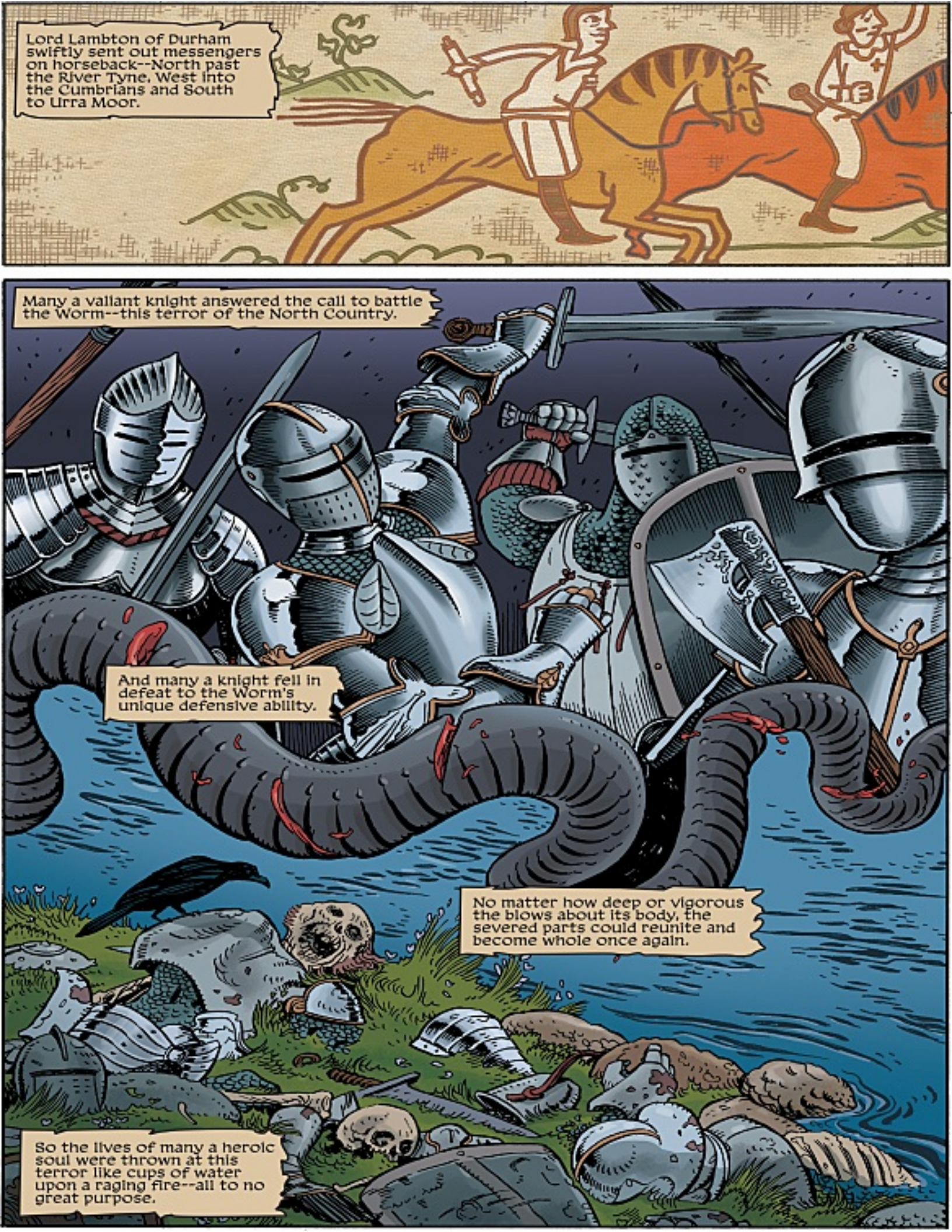
Although the finest meal was found in the sweet milk from Loren Pearce's cows.

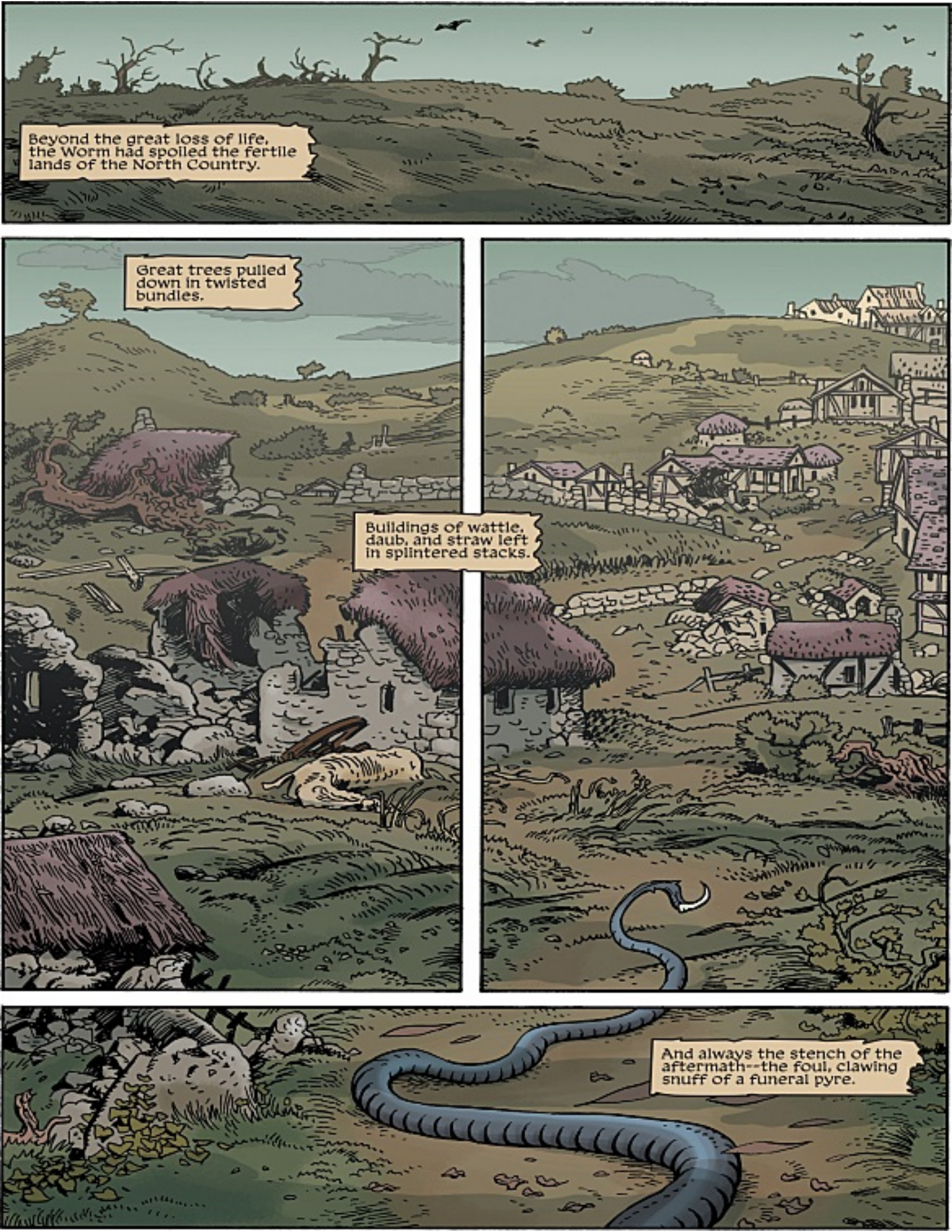
LAMBTON
This routine feeding continued day upon day, as the Worm continued to grow, and grow, and grow, until it was able to entwine the hill it slept on three times around.
Having pillaged and marred the lands around Lambton Hall the Worm had become the terror of the North Country.

One day, however, the Worm set its sights on Lambton Hall and its venerable lord.
When the Lord heard the news of the Worm crossing the river he assembled the household.
MY FAITHFUL SERVANTS. THE BEAST OF THE NORTH COUNTRY IS NOW UPON US.
OH, NO!
THE RUMORS ARE TRUE?
WHAT SHALL WE DO?
MAY I SUGGEST TO YOUR LORDSHIP THAT WE OFFER IT A TRIBUTE?
TALES OF ITS DESIRE FOR MILK ARE KNOWN IN THE NORTH COUNTRY.
WE COULD FILL THE WATERING TROUGH WITH MILK TO SLAKE THE THIRST OF THE WORM?
Without delay the steward was given charge to fill the stone trough in the courtyard with milk.
The Worm supped the milk from the trough without leaving a drop.

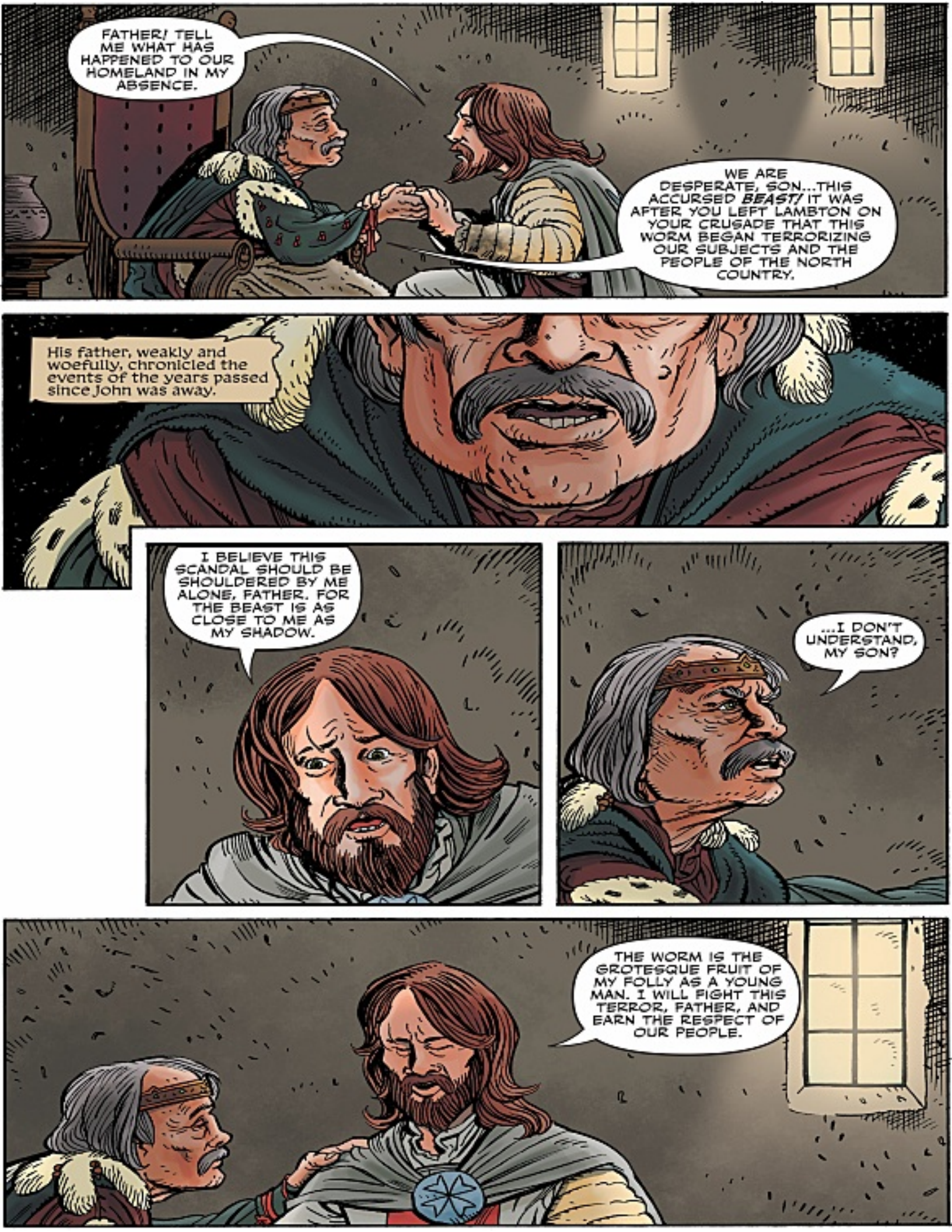
Each day the trough was filled and again the Worm sup-sup-supped the milk and returned to the countryside leaving Lambton Hall unscathed.
MY LORDSHIP, THE BEAST IS DRINKING THE MILK OF NINE COWS DAILY. AT THIS PACE, WE SHALL NOT SATISFY ITS THIRST.
KA-KLINK
CREAAA-KRUMP
OH, SO SORRY THAT PART OF THE STORY WAS MAKING ME TERRIBLY THIRSTY.
MMM... MILK.
BE THANKFUL I AM NOT A CAT. AS I WOULD BE IN YOUR LAP BY NOW MAKING YOU *SHARE* THAT GLASS. PLEASE, CONTINUE YOUR STORY.
HM, TOO TRUE. NOW WHERE WAS I? *AH!* SO THE LORD OF LAMBTON WAS IN QUITE A BIND, MY FURRY FELLOW.

Upon the third day, the trough was sadly empty and so they prayed.
IT HAS COME.
THAT SERPENT MUST BE AS LONG AS THE RIVER WEAR ITSELF!
HISSSSSSSS
The worm was so enraged at the empty trough, it lashed out with a fury.
In the wild eyes of the beast, our Lord saw his fate if he would do nothing more to stop it.


Lord Lambton of Durham swiftly sent out messengers on horseback--North past the River Tyne, West into the Cumbrians and South to Urra Moor.
Many a valiant knight answered the call to battle the Worm--this terror of the North Country.
And many a knight fell in defeat to the Worm's unique defensive ability.
No matter how deep or vigorous the blows about its body, the severed parts could reunite and become whole once again.
So the lives of many a heroic soul were thrown at this terror like cups of water upon a raging fire--all to no great purpose.


Beyond the great loss of life, the Worm had spoiled the fertile lands of the North Country.
Great trees pulled down in twisted bundles.
Buildings of wattle, daub, and straw left in splintered stacks.
And always the stench of the aftermath--the foul, clawing snuff of a funeral pyre.

On this day the sun cast the shadow of a man, not a boy, upon this troubled land.
After seven long years, John Lambton, now a Knight of Rhodes, had returned home.
He returned to the proud home of his ancestors to find it in ruin, waste and desolation.
He returned to see his people subjugated to the will of the Worm.
He returned to find his now gaunt father, Lord Edward Lambton, anxious, overcome and fading into the grave.

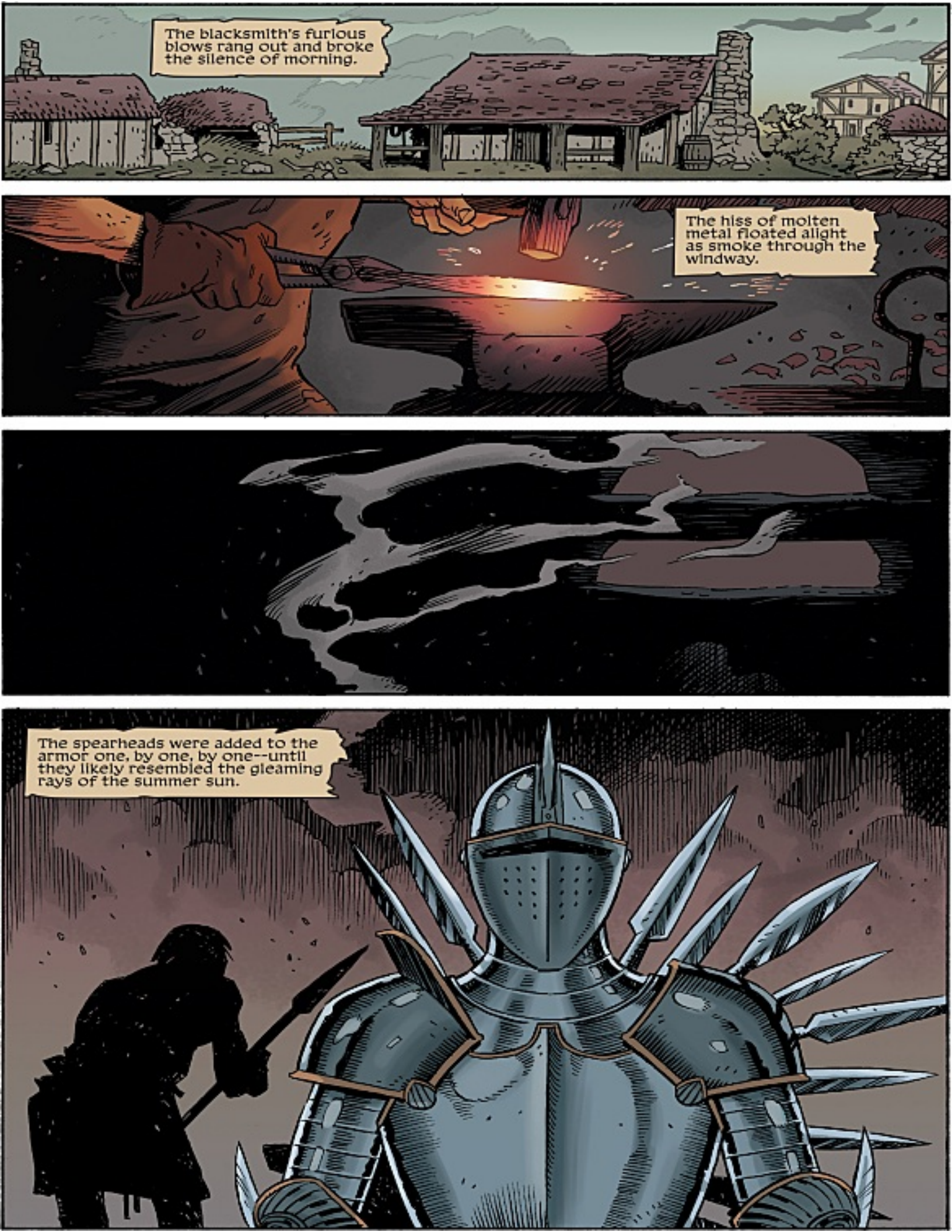

FATHER! TELL ME WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO OUR HOMELAND IN MY ABSENCE.
WE ARE DESPERATE, SON...THIS ACCURSED *BEAST!* IT WAS AFTER YOU LEFT LAMBTON ON YOUR CRUSADE THAT THIS WORM BEGAN TERRORIZING OUR SUBJECTS AND THE PEOPLE OF THE NORTH COUNTRY.
His father, weakly and woefully, chronicled the events of the years passed since John was away.
I BELIEVE THIS SCANDAL SHOULD BE SHOULDERED BY ME ALONE, FATHER. FOR THE BEAST IS AS CLOSE TO ME AS MY SHADOW.
...I DON'T UNDERSTAND, MY SON?
THE WORM IS THE GROTESQUE FRUIT OF MY FOLLY AS A YOUNG MAN. I WILL FIGHT THIS TERROR, FATHER, AND EARN THE RESPECT OF OUR PEOPLE.

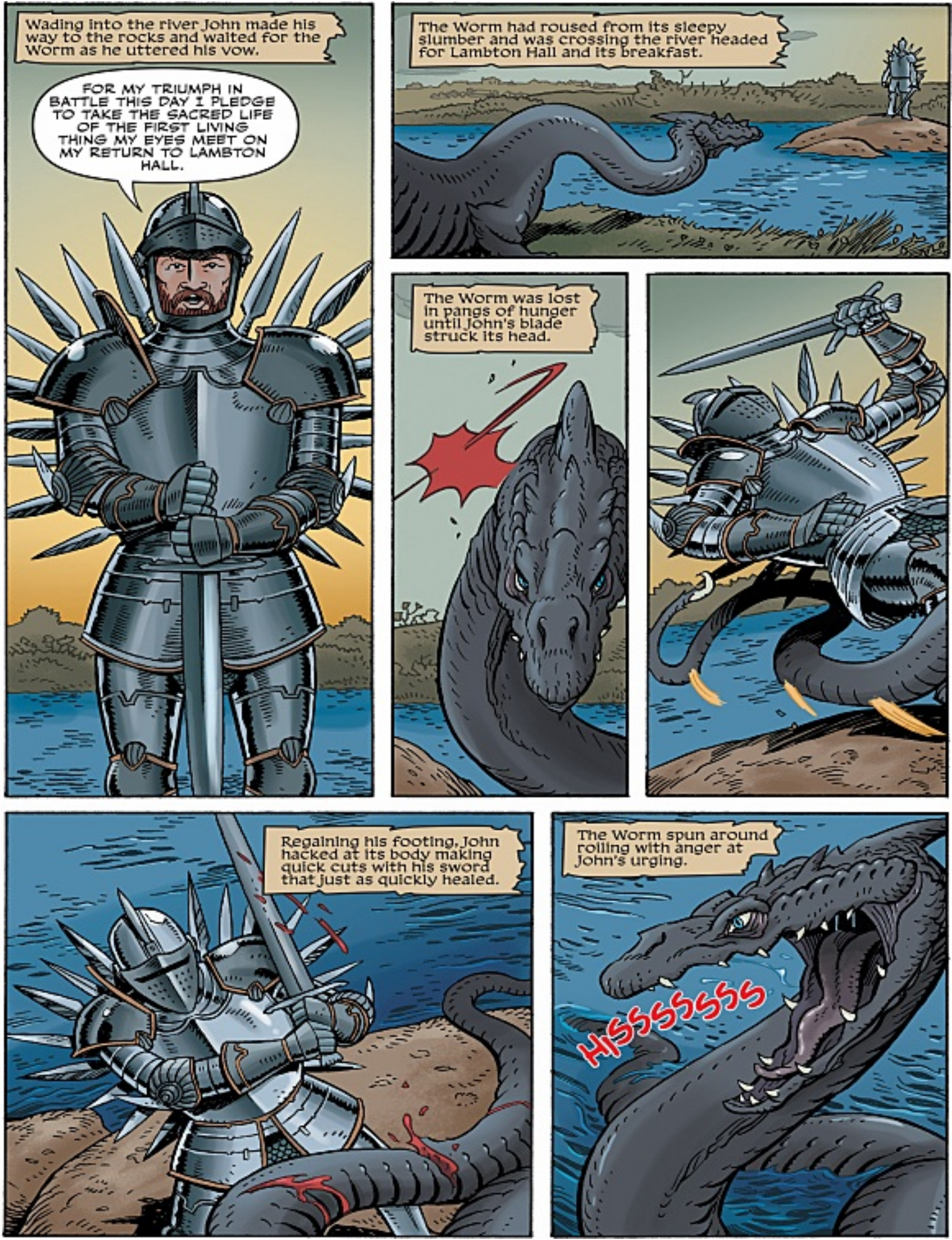
I SHALL SEEK THE COUNCIL OF AN ORACLE. I PRAY SHE WILL GIVE ME ADVICE TO DEFEAT THIS FOUL WORM.
MASTER, IF I MAY? I KNOW OF SUCH AN ORACLE. ONLY A HALF-DAY RIDE FROM HERE.
John swiftly left Lambton Hall with the Lord's steward in tow as retainer and guide.
Further, further, further into the wilderness along a maze of roads and trails and footpaths.
Until they reached the cottage of the woman they sought.

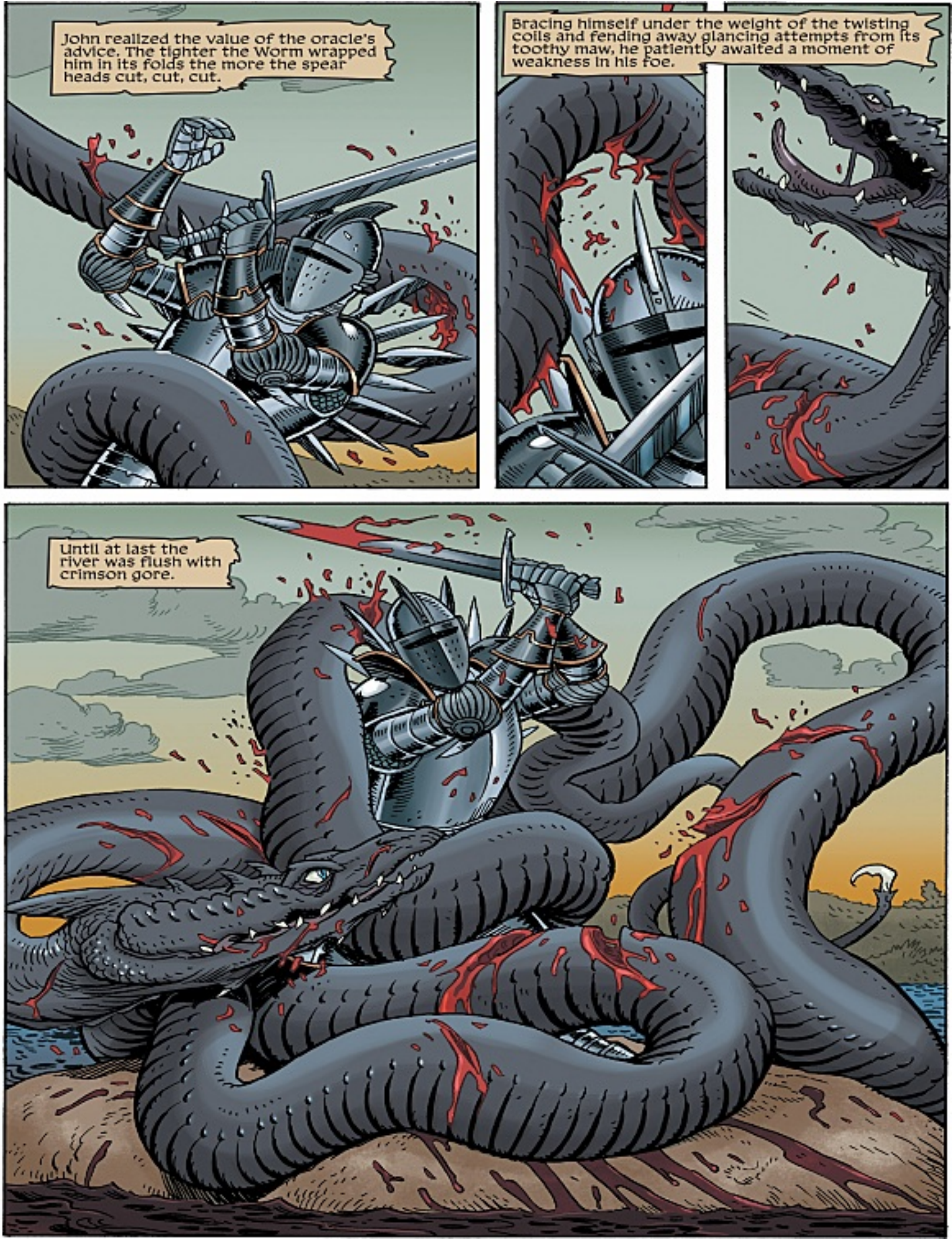
Inside, the scents of Amber, Foxglove, and Belladonna hung in the air, as the young lord began to speak...
I AM JOHN, KNIGHT OF RHODES AND HEIR TO THE LORDSHIP OF LAMBTON. I SEEK COUNCIL AND ADVICE IN MATTERS OF GRAVE IMPORTANCE.
She looked him over with a wide gaze and crooked tilt of the head as she fingered a necklace of bead and bone.
THE WORM?
Y-YES. I HAVE, IN WHAT SEEMS ANOTHER LIFETIME, BROUGHT RUIN UPON THIS LAND. MANY YEARS AGO I FISHED ON THE SABBATH AND CAUGHT THE WORM, THIS TERROR OF THE NORTH COUNTRY. THOUGH, I NEVER WISHED SUCH MISERY FOR MY FATHER EDWARD, OR FOR MY PEOPLE.
YOUR HATE, YOUR DISRESPECT, YOUR PROFANE ACTIONS--ALL CORRUPT, ALL BROUGHT RUIN AND ROT! *YOU* CALLED IT OUT OF THE DEPTHS-- IT *HEARD* YOUR SONG.

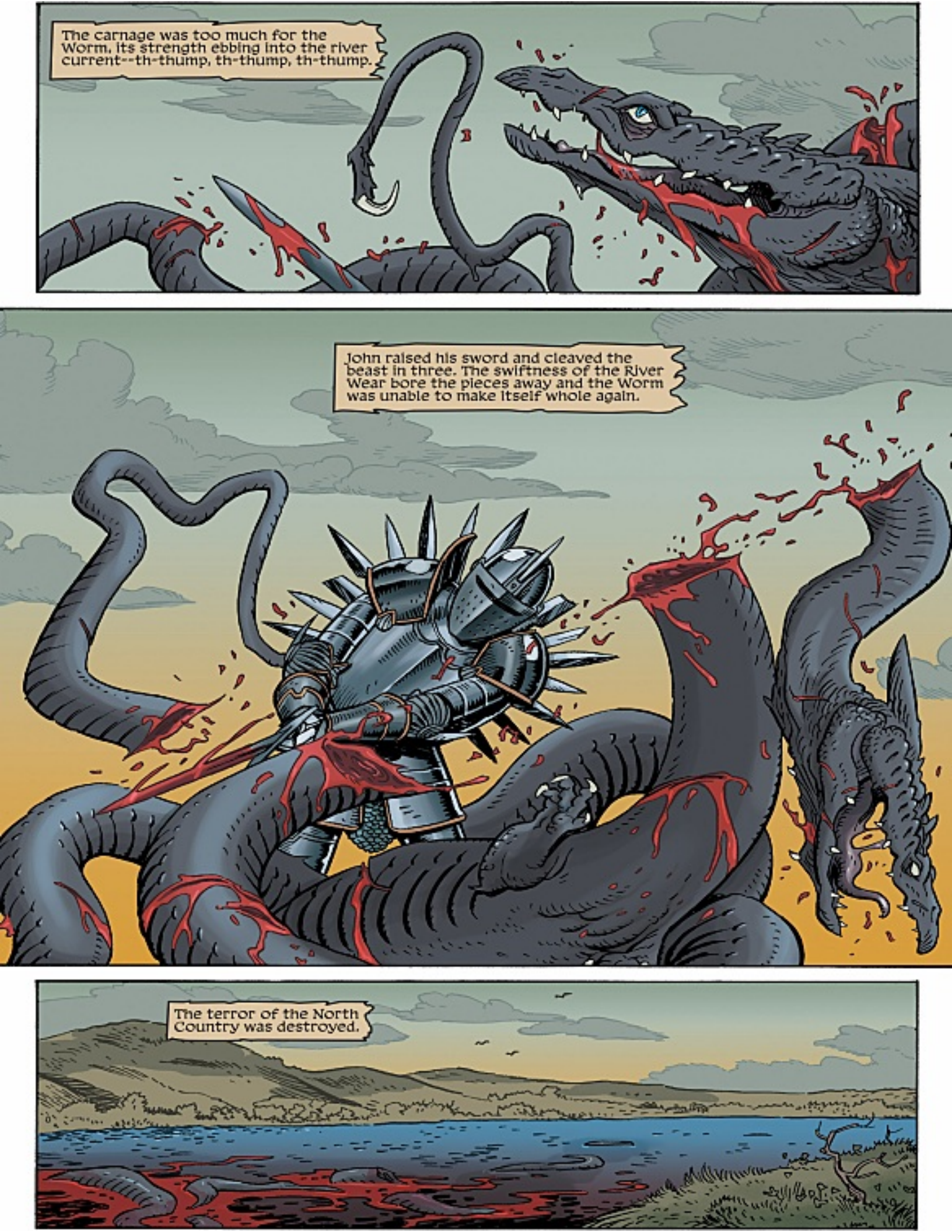
THAT WAS TRUE OF THE PERSON I WAS SO LONG AGO. WHILE I HAVE BEEN AWAY FROM MY HOMELAND I HAVE BATTLED MORE WITH THE DARKNESS IN MYSELF THAN WITH ANY ADVERSARY.
JOHN, HEIR TO THE LORDSHIP OF LAMBTON, ONLY YOU CAN RETURN THE WORM TO THE VILE PLACE FROM WHERE IT CAME.
HOW SHALL I DEFEAT THIS WORM? ALL THAT HAVE FAILED TO VANQUISH THE BEAST SHARED THE SAME FLESH AND BLOOD AS I.
The oracle saw the penitence in the heir's eyes and heard it in his words.
UPON YOUR RETURN TO LAMBTON TAKE YOUR FINEST SUIT OF MAIL, ONE THAT HAS SERVED YOU WELL, TO A BLACKSMITH AND HAVE IT STUDDED WITH SPEAR HEADS.
WEARING THIS ARMOR, GO TO THE ROCK IN THE MIDDLE OF THE RIVER WEAR. DO THIS BEFORE THE SUN HAS CENTERED ITSELF IN THE SKY. THERE AWAIT THE WORM'S RETURN WITH TRUST IN THE DIVINE AND THE TEMPER OF YOUR SWORD.

BEFORE YOU ENCOUNTER THIS VILLAIN YOU MUST TAKE A VOW: A SACRIFICIAL VOW FOR THIS FORESIGHT. THAT IF YOU ARE SUCCESSFUL, YOU SHALL KILL THE FIRST LIVING THING THAT IS MET ON YOUR WAY HOMEWARD.
AYE! THANK YOU. IT SHALL BE DONE, MISTRESS.
HOLD! FOR THAT IS NOT THE ONLY LIMB OF THIS TASK.
IF YOU FAIL IN FULFILLING THIS VOW, FOR NINE GENERATIONS, NO LAMBTON MEN SHALL DIE IN THEIR BEDS. OLD-AGE WILL NOT BE THEIR FROLIC.
UNDERSTOOD.
John and the steward returned to Lambton Hall and set upon fulfilling the advice of the oracle.


The blacksmith's furious blows rang out and broke the silence of morning.
The hiss of molten metal floated alight as smoke through the windway.
The spearheads were added to the armor one, by one, by one--until they likely resembled the gleaming rays of the summer sun.


Wading into the river John made his way to the rocks and waited for the Worm as he uttered his vow.
FOR MY TRIUMPH IN BATTLE THIS DAY I PLEDGE TO TAKE THE SACRED LIFE OF THE FIRST LIVING THING MY EYES MEET ON MY RETURN TO LAMBTON HALL.
The Worm had roused from its sleepy slumber and was crossing the river headed for Lambton Hall and its breakfast.
The Worm was lost in pangs of hunger until John's blade struck its head.
Regaining his footing, John hacked at its body making quick cuts with his sword that just as quickly healed.
The Worm spun around rolling with anger at John's urging.
HISSSSSSS


John realized the value of the oracle's advice. The tighter the Worm wrapped him in its folds the more the spear heads cut, cut, cut.
Bracing himself under the weight of the twisting coils and fending away glancing attempts from its toothy maw, he patiently awaited a moment of weakness in his foe.
Until at last the river was flush with crimson gore.


The carnage was too much for the Worm, its strength ebbing into the river current--th-thump, th-thump, th-thump.
John raised his sword and cleaved the beast in three. The swiftness of the River Wear bore the pieces away and the Worm was unable to make itself whole again.
The terror of the North Country was destroyed.

During this desperate conflict the households of Lambton had shuttered themselves inside. They were anxiously awaiting a trumpet call that would signal John, the conqueror on this fateful day.

This signal would assure Lord Lambton of John's safety as well as for his steward to release the hunting hound that would serve as the required sacrifice to the oracle and the vow he made.

HARNT HAARRRN

Sadly, when the bugle was heard Lord Lambton, forgetting everything but his son and his safety, ran from the Hall to embrace his heroic heir.

John was dumbfounded as he watched his father scamper down the lane with the hunting hound close behind.

FATHER?!

I CANNOT KILL MY FATHER TO APPEASE THIS VOW.

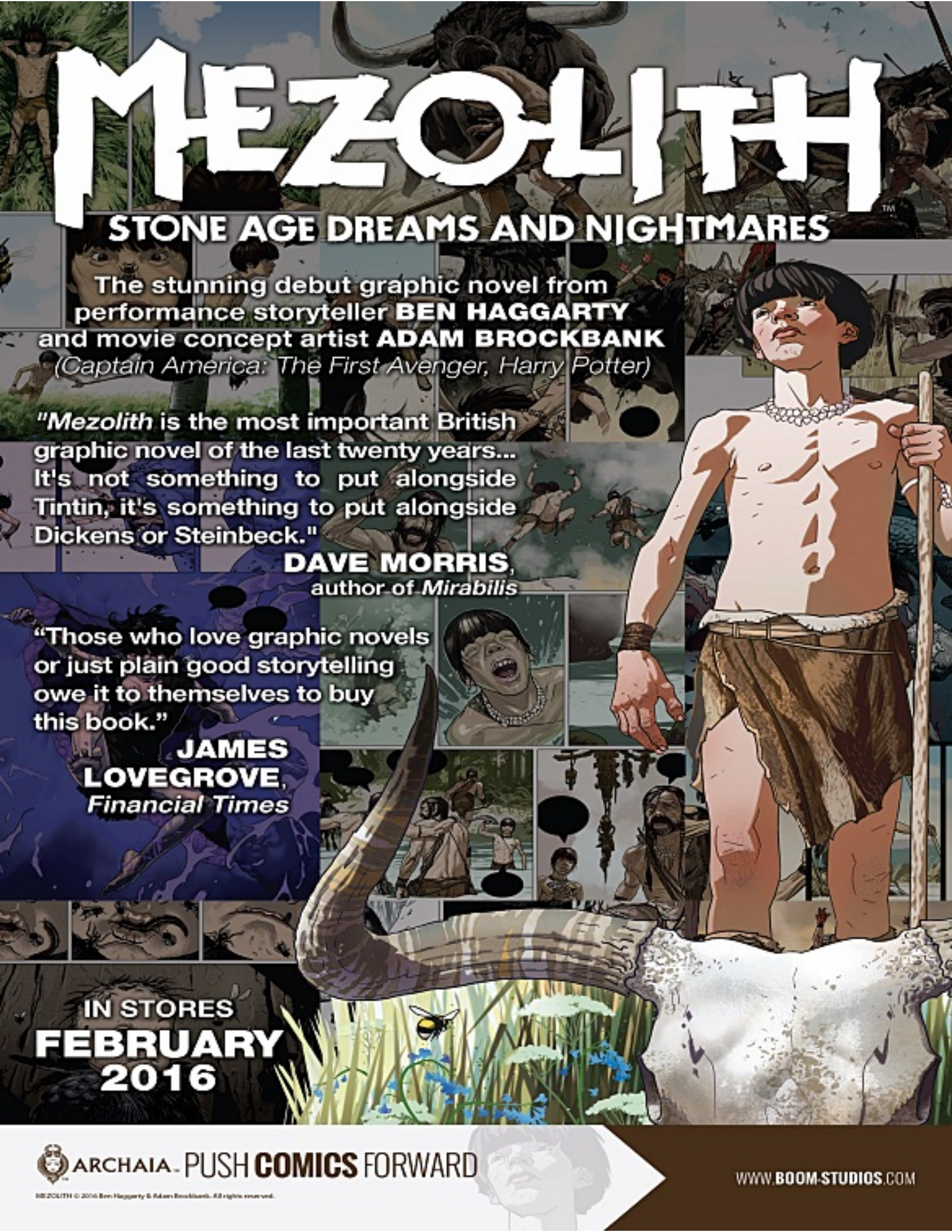
John, Knight of Rhodes and heir to the lordship of Lambton, slumped to his knees in defeat. Praying that this curse the oracle foretold had been just folly to rouse his spirit for battle.

Well, sadly for John, the vow had been broken. The oracle's prediction fulfilled and the Lambton men, for nine generations, all died at youthful and vital ages.
YOU HAD ME WORRIED ABOUT THE HOUND.
AH! YOU MUST THINK ME A RIGHT CRUEL MAN, MY FRIEND.
WELL, NOT IN THIS STORY, AT LEAST.
THE END

A new tale spun next month...

ALBINA

story and art by HANNAH CHRISTENSON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